A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

On Christ the King Sunday

Daniel 7, John 18

November 25, 2018

Christian witness, right in the face of every bombastic claim to worldly authority, is that the ultimate and final ruler of the world is its Creator, God in Jesus Christ. Even if God’s rule seems hopelessly defeated, the Lord reigns. Even if it in no way is fully evident, even if the world’s ways resist divine reign, even if we still waffle in our faith and our obedience . . .Christ will reign. The Alpha is also the Omega.

Except in glimpses of grace, we don’t see God’s reign yet. It doesn’t appear the meek will inherit the earth anytime soon. We don’t see peacemakers being called children of God or the merciful receiving mercy. Not too often. We don’t see a world rightly ordered to the worship and glory of its Maker. We don’t yet see every knee on heaven and earth and under the earth bowed at the name of Jesus. We don’t yet see every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord.

Certainly not, not in very many ways in the world out there or even in ourselves in here, do we see the reign of Christ yet, but we have not lost hope: that someday Christ will reign, and that Christ’s reign has already begun. It’s a wonderful hope.

It’s an odd thing, though isn’t it? To think of a Bethlehem migrant’s son as ruler of the world . . .soon our eyes will search for a baby in Bethlehem and we’ll pay attention again to the humility of his birth—a manger, homelessness, and awed young parents just trying to survive. From the beginning of his life his identity was a matter of life and death. It wasn’t long after his birth that rulers of this world felt threatened by a baby that some people were saying is the true king. They were right to be concerned, even the rulers of Rome.

Jesus is the finality that belies all boasts of human ultimacy, even by its most powerful rulers. Years earlier Daniel in his vivid dream saw fantastic beasts representing four of history’s great empires. In his vision,

a lion with eagle wings was the Babylonian Empire;

a bear was the Median Empire;

a leopard with bird’s wings was the Persian Empire.

Here we have King Nebuchadnezzar who wanted the honor of men. King Belshazzar, who wanted the glory of men. King Darius, who wanted the souls of men. Nebuchadnezzar built an enormous statue and commanded everyone to worship it. But Daniel would not bow. Belshazzar took that which was dedicated to God and used it for his own pleasure and entertainment. But Daniel would not dance. Darius commanded everyone to pray to him and no one else, but Daniel would not bend the knee. Babylon, The Medes, Persia, all formidable. The lion, the bear, the leopard.

But finally Daniel envisions the most dreadful beast yet with iron teeth and ten horns standing for Alexander’s Greek Empire. The last beast sprouts an eleventh horn that boasts about its god-like power, a little horn that plucked up those who had come before, and claimed great, god-like power for itself. You know what they say, the bigger they think they are the farther they fall.

Few of us have self-illusions of being sovereign rulers of anything much more than ourselves and our grasp on even that is pretty tenuous much of the time, yet our lives are lived on a grand stage. We are caught between two visions of earthly life and always asked: whom will you serve? Where is your faith? Whom do you trust? What will you fear and whom will you serve?

As earthly powers battle for supremacy, a solemn scene takes shape. While the horn is ceaselessly boasting, the Ancient of Days takes his seat. A heavenly court assembles where the Ancient of Days judges the four beasts. The first three are allowed to remain but have their authority taken away, but the fourth beast is put to death and burned up. Contrary to the illusions of unchecked power, there will be a final judgment of every empire and nation. It will be final, not because it will happen at the end of time but because there is no court of appeal. The time of all empires comes to an end. (Doug Lee, <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2009/11/ultimate-imagination/>) The self-congratulatory chatter of all emperors will be silenced.

Even when in the arms of his parents on the run to Egypt, even when enduring persecution from religious and political rulers, he was the once and future and forever king. The one who was and is and is to come.

Daniel saw it all in his night visions: The Son of Man is given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Time, which searches the horizon in hope with the prophets, kneels before a manger, walks somberly to Jerusalem, is shocked to shame by the cross, and amazed by the resurrection, now returns to its hope from the beginning: to kneel at the foot of his everlasting throne.

We are coming round the bend of liturgical time, with our eyes set toward the fullness of time, in our dreams and faith, and in our hope to a vision of Jesus Christ as king of kings and Lord of Lords. It is a vision that ought to be renewed more than once per year, and indeed be ever present with us. When we only have in mind a Christ who oozes warm friendship, therapeutic kindness, and gentle friendliness toward people like us, helping us be really nice people and live happy lives, we would do well to remember that the friend of sinners is also the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Son of Man. All crowns are cast down at his feet.

“Are you King of the Jews?” Pontius Pilate asked incredulously. As representative of Rome, Pilate was ruler of his domain. He stood on the authority of the greatest empire the world had ever known. The worldly powers Daniel knew would have trembled in the presence of Rome’s might. Someone like Pilate knows exactly what it meant to be king, he knows the power and the responsibility. Heavy lies the crown.

Pilate had heard about Jesus, so popular among the crowds in the countryside. He’d been warned about Jesus, the revolutionary insurgent threatening the tenuous peace. But when Pilate finally met Jesus face to face, he was, I’m guessing, unimpressed. In all four Gospels, “Are you king of the Jews?” is Pilate’s first question to Jesus and in all four gospels the “you” is emphatic. Are **you** king?

“My kingdom is not of the world,” Jesus replies to a puzzled Pilate, who cannot possibly understand what that means. If he had understood at all he would have asked him instead, “Just what sort of King are you?”

But the Pilates of the world don’t have imagination for any different sort of kingship than they already know. They don’t have imagination for a kingdom not built on power but humility, a rule not won through violent victory but won through love’s lonely offices, and through sacrifice. The life Jesus lived was robed in humility instead of linen. The crown Christ wore was spiked with thorns, not inlaid with jewels. The death Christ died was a sinner’s shame, not a ruler’s repose. The Pilates of the world need to control the world to protect their own power. Jesus relinquishes all control, even unto death. Which is true freedom? Which is love? Where is true power? It is with the one whose robe fills the Temple, whose crown of thorns became a crown of glory, and who won victory over death itself. True love, true power is in Jesus Christ alone. All others who demand your allegiance are pretenders to the throne of the world and the throne of your heart. They don’t deserve you.

The reign of Christ is forever. With the dreamers, we search the horizon for his kingdom to come in its fullness. Until then, with the prophets, we pray that his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The carpenter’s son, crucified and buried, is the Son of God, the King of Kings, the King of all kings, the Son of Man who ascended to heaven and now reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

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